1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
AW32 Gond AW32

CHAPTER I

THE SETTING IN TIME; THE HISTORICAL ISOLATION OF BASTAR

BASTAR STATE lies at the extreme south-east corner of the Central Provinces of India, between 17° 46′ and 20° 14′ north, and 80° 15′ and 82° 1′ east. Its area, according to the recently revised Survey of India figures, of 13,725 square miles makes it the tenth state in India in size, larger than Belgium and nearly as large as Holland. It is far larger than any of the old Central Provinces and Orissa States, with which it has recently been brought into the new Eastern States Agency. But it is one of the most sparsely peopled tracts of India, the 1931 population of 524,721 giving a density of only 34 to the square mile. If any part of India is still *terra incognita* to nearly all British officials and travellers, it is the vast tract covered by Bastar and the huge Jeypore zamindari recently transferred from the Vizagapatam Agency of Madras to the new province of Orissa. To the ordinary Indian of neighbouring districts, even to many of the few immigrant Hindu and Mussalman traders, this remains a land of savages, seeking still for human victims to sacrifice to their fetishes, skilled in herbs and simples, and potent practitioners of magic and witchcraft. Their view is little changed from that held 110 years ago by Maratha officials who described the Marias of the Abujhmar mountains to Sir Richard Jenkins, then Resident at the Court of Nagpur, as 'naked savages, living on roots and sprigs, and hunting for strangers to sacrifice'.

Bastar has in fact always been an almost unknown backwater of the river of Indian history. The late Chief, Maharani Prafulla Kumari Devi, at her accession in 1924 was the last legitimate survivor of one of the most ancient royal families of southern India, the Kakatiya, which reigned at Warangal from about A.D. 1150 to 1425, first possibly as feudatories of the Chalukya kings and then independently. In Bastar folk-song, Annam Deo, the first to reign in Bastar, is spoken of as 'Chalkibans Raja', which may be a corruption of 'Chalukya-bans' and indicate that the Kakatiya family was a cadet branch of the Chalukya. Pratap Rudra, the greatest and the last independent Kakatiya king of Warangal, lost his life and independence in battle with the Mohammedan invaders of the Deccan under Ahmad Shah Bahmani early in the fifteenth century and, according to Bastar tradition and folk-song, his brother Annam Deo fled across the Godavari into Bastar, which had

1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
AW32 Gond AW32
Hill Maria
Bison Horn Maria

175 The earliest recorded attempt of any European to enter Bastar was made by Captain Blunt in 1795, when journeying from Chunarghur in the United Provinces to Yertnagudam in the 'Ellore Circar' of Madras. His report, which has recently been reprinted in a Central Provinces Government publication, 'Early English Travellers in the Nagpur Territories', was referred to as late as 1853 by Sir Erskine Perry, addressing the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, as still giving almost all the information then known not only about Bastar, but of many other parts of Gondwana (the modern Central Provinces), the highlands and jungles of which then comprised 'such a large tract of unexplored country that they form quite an oasis in our maps'. Before his attempt he was warned by both Ittul Pandit, the Maratha governor of Chhattisgarh, and by the Raja of Kanker that he would find it difficult if not impossible to march across Bastar from Kanker to Jeypore, the country being wild and mountainous and the Gond inhabitants very savage. The people were said to be naturally quiet; but the Marathas had never succeeded in doing more than persuade Bastar to pay an occasional small tribute. At that time this had been withheld for four or five years, and the Marathas had only just made the Bastar Chief pay Rs. 5,000 after a series of raids on Bastar territory, which they had persuaded the various 'Gond zemeendars' and neighbours of Bastar to make in order to wrest from him as much territory as possible; in the course of these raids many villages along the Kanker-Jagdalpur-Jeypore road had been plundered, and even the Banjara carriers had abandoned that route to Jeypore. In retaliation, raiding parties from Bastar often descended to plunder the plains villages.[1] Captain Blunt therefore turned west and marched through the zamindaris of the present Drug and Chanda districts, but ultimately attempted to pass from the Ahiri zamindari in the far south-east of the Chanda district across the Indrawati river into the Bhopalpatnam zamindari of Bastar, some miles upstream from the confluence of the Indrawati and the Godavari. He was fiercely attacked by the 'Bastar Gonds' both by day and night, and though their bows, arrows and axes were no match for his firearms, he abandoned the attempt to enter

[18] [1] Compare the following extract from Firminger's Edition of the Fifth Report on East India Affairs, 1812, Vol. III, page 109 et seq., referring to the people of Bastar, Rampa and Kalahandi:—

'The people in general, although rude and barbarous, may yet be denominated warlike, as they have always distinguished themselves as bold persevering champions of the great law of nature. Being driven to their wild unwholesome fastnesses among the mountains, they frequently descend in harvest time into the lowlands, to dispute the produce of their ancient rightful inheritance with the present possessors, but their incursions are desultory and simply impelled by the pressing want of subsistence.'

1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
AW32 Gond AW32
Hill Maria
Bison Horn Maria

695 There was a disputed boundary between the village of Kurmer in the Chhota Dongar Mar *pargana* and the adjacent Kutru Mar village of Jatalur; the Jata clan asserted possession over a strip of land belonging to the Parlio clan of Kurmer. I suggested, on the strength of a tale I had heard of former Chiefs' methods of justice, that the head of each village should come with a cock to the land, and that the land should go to the clan whose cock crowed first. This was hailed by both sides as a sound solution, and off we went to the land; but just before we reached it the Jata headman began to hang back, and finally backed out of the test; I awarded the land to the Parlio clan to the approval of men present from other clans, and on going over the land found that it contained a *pagh'ai* or alternative village site of the Parlio clan besides the cromlech left to mark the site of the Village Mother's 'temple', the *kasyeq-gaita's udam-garia* or seat of honour, and the *kotokal* or line of menhirs erected in the name of the Parlio dead. Here the Jata clan finally abandoned their claim when challenged by the Parlio *kasyeq-gaita* to eat earth from under the Village Mother's cromlech.

● 181 To be left to live the free life of the hills, untrammelled by restrictions on his user of forest, earth and water or his right to shift his village and his *penda* cultivation, is the unconscious ideal of the Hill Maria. If he is sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, he will beg to be hanged rather than be confined within walls; and few of them or of the wilder Bison-horn Marias survive long imprisonment.

517 [823] The Hill Maria shows great artistry in his bead-work, and is never at fault in his discrimination between colours and shades, though he uses for all shades of green and blue the one word *kaqarondla*. He has general terms also for red, white, black and yellow, but none for intermediate shades. In his houses he draws 532 rude cup-marking patterns, *swastikas* and strange creatures in white earth on his mud plaster, or makes rough clay representations of women's breasts. His songs are low and rather melancholic in 533 sound, the youths' voices verging on contralto; but they are far easier for an English ear to understand than Hindu music, and have often a haunting refrain. Both he and the Bison-horn Maria love to hear European records on a gramophone, especially a good soprano or contralto, sea shanties, and violins or trios and quartets playing light chamber music; but operatic fireworks merely provoke laughter, Chaliapin singing the 'Song of Prince Igor' making them [534] ache with laughter, but being often encored. The Marias as a whole have no musical instruments except drums. Though the 517 Bison-horn Maria does not show the Hill Maria's artistry and 153

3: Elwin E-5 (1935-1942) 1943
AW32 Gond AW32
Bison Horn Maria

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE ABORIGINAL PRISONER

I

How do the Maria get on in jail? This is a question that only a Jailor can answer, but I have been told by those responsible for aboriginal prisoners what an appalling ordeal prison life is for people accustomed to the great freedoms of the hills and forests. 'If a Maria is sentenced to a long term of imprisonment', says Grigson, 'he will beg to be hanged rather than be confined within walls: and few of the wilder Bison-horn Maria survive long imprisonment'.[1] The grim forbidding walls, the stone beds, the rule of silence, the attitude of suppliant and obsequious deference before officials, the absence of any kind of recreation, the lack of all religious comfort, the denial of human companionship, the appalling monotony oppress and crush them. The Maria is perhaps insensitive to mental suffering, but on the other hand he has no reserve of philosophical or intellectual fortitude to draw on in a crisis. To him life with a woman and daily intercourse with her, a good supply of tobacco, the rough simple food of his village and the not infrequent stimulus of alcohol are perhaps the only necessities of existence. But they are necessary, and many prisoners have told me that they missed these things far more than the restraint upon their liberty.

How do the prisoners themselves look back on their experience? I will attempt to discover this by quoting their own sayings. Markami Doga said, 'I felt very sad in jail, and my thoughts were always in my house'. Another man said that he was continually worrying about his children and who would look after them. Another was distracted lest in his absence his cattle would be distributed like fowls among the neighbours. Many of the prisoners with whom I talked in jail had an extremely sad and pitiable look. I particularly remember the suffering on the face of Habka Masa who had

[1] Grigson, op. cit., p. 96. Since this was written, improved conditions in the Jagdalpur jail have increased the life-expectation of all the prisoners.

[p.207]